

# **MACEDONIAN MINORITY**

## **Preliminary data (Background)**

Albania has already ratified the Convention on the national minorities in June 1999. Such a problem has been among the priorities of the government since the start of the democratic processes in Albania. In 1993 the Constitutional Law on the citizens' rights and freedoms was passed that sanctioned the rights of the minorities in the Albanian territory. In 1998 the Constitution of the Republic of Albania passed. Article 20 of the Constitution has a separate part for the minority issue. Article 20 is made up of two paragraphs as follows: "1) Persons who belong to national minorities exercise the human rights and freedoms in full equality before the law. 2) They have the right freely to express, without prohibition or compulsion, their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic belonging. 3) They have the right to preserve and develop them, to study and to be taught in their mother tongue, and to unite in organizations and associations for the protection of their interests and identity."

It may be said that the Albanian government has continuously respected the obligation undertaken since before World War I to the League of Nations for the respect of the minorities' rights at the moment was accepted in this organization in 1920. Consequently minority populations in Albania have never been an object of special discrimination in any historical periods of the development of the Albanian state. No doubt under the totalitarian regime minorities have had the limitations of the time, but in any case they have shared the fate of the majority of the population suffering from the repressive politics within and from the complete outer isolation. Position of the minorities and their treatment has undertaken a new dimension with the fall of the totalitarian regime and with the development of the democratic process in Albania. The position of the minorities has been significantly improved not only in the context of the citizens' rights and freedoms but also with new space created for them in the relations with the motherland country.

Albania's international commitment for minorities has been re-assessed with the ratification of the 1999 Convention of the Council of Europe for the protection of minorities.

It does not mean, however, there have been no problems and that the required standards from the internal and international legislation have been complied with. The country has entered since 12 years the road of democratic transformation and during this period there have been held many reforms and there have been achieved good results changing the look of the Albanian society. Transition period in Albania,

however, has been relatively difficult and has been negatively affected, has also brought about obstacles in the full exercising of the fundamental rights and freedoms from the majority of the population and from the minority one.

Macedonian minority is located in the area of Prespa situated in the north-east of Korça district, 30 km away. This area is located in the south-eastern edge of the Albanian territory bordering Macedonia and Greece. Prespa Area is 213.9 km<sup>2</sup>. Actually the population is 418 inhabitants. The borderline of Prespa Lake with the Albanian border is 35km. Along this borderline there are located 9 minority villages of Prespa Area accordingly: Liqenasi (Pustec), Lajthiza, Zaroshka, Cerja, Shulini, Gollomboqi, Gorica e Vogël, Bezmishti dhe Gorica e Madhe. Administratively the 9 minority villages comprise the Commune of Liqenasi after the name of Liqenasi village which is the largest. This village previously was named Pustec, but later on its name and the names of other villages were albanianized. In a meeting with the locals, it was demanded that the villages be called after their original names: Pustec, Gollomboq, Bezmisht etc. the local government senior officials expressed their willingness to accept this demand.

The Albanian government was committed to the observation of minorities since after the World War I was acceded as a member of the League of Nations. But minority issue was identified with the Greek minority issue on the south edge of the country in between two wars. Macedonian minority of Prespa area has not possessed the minority status. Its minority status was recognized after the World War II after the establishment of the Republic of Macedonia as a member of the Yugoslav Federation. Over the entire communist regime it is treated more or less like the Greek minority. But it is obvious that after the democratic changes of the 90-ies in Albania, observation of the minority rights has assumed a new dimension. Position of minorities has considerably improved in some directions, as regards the entitlement of the rights and fundamental freedoms with the other citizens as well as the relations with the mother countries.

### **Macedonian minority at the centre of AHC attention**

Albanian Helsinki Committee has ranked as the top priorities of its agenda the observation of the situation in the minority areas. Special attention is shown to the situation of the Macedonian minority. Some surveys have been conducted. Prior to the recent monitoring another one has been conducted in the Prespa area.

In the course of its commitment AHC undertook a new monitoring in the project entrusted by the Council of Europe. In this observation participated: Ms. Vasilika Hysi, Executive Director, Z. Niazi Jaho, Legal Adviser, Ms. Edlira Papavangjeli, Program Coordinator, Ms. Ketii Qirinxhi, AHC correspondent for Korça district. The monitoring group in the established contacts, put forth for discussion issues related to education, infrastructure, setting up training courses, situation at the customs, employment, health etc.

As a result of this monitoring, the conclusion drawn was that the situation in the Macedonian minority area appeared to be satisfactory. The basic rights were observed and the inhabitants were treated as equal citizens. Position of minorities is legally sanctioned especially in the Albanian Constitution. Article 20 of the Constitution guarantees 1) equality as to law of people pertaining to national minorities and 2) their fundamental rights such as freedom of expression of ethnic, cultural religious and linguistic belonging as well as their education in the mother tongue. This commitment of the Albanian state is further reinforced with the ratification made by the Albanian Assembly of the Context Convention for national minorities protection in 1999.

However, although the situation is generally satisfactory, this is not an implication that the problems are non-existent and all the required standards have been achieved not only by national but also by international legislation. The transition period in Albania has been extremely difficult and this has conditioned the rights and the fundamental freedoms of the majority of the population as well as those of the governmental groups.

Still there are more problems that need more consideration. During the recent 2-3 years measures have been taken as regards the further improvement of the situation. Efforts are made as regards the improvement of the education, infrastructure, intensification of the relationships with neighboring Macedonia. Researches have been held for a better operation of schools, education, economic growth and its prospects.

#The inhabitants of Prespa Area are mainly involved in agriculture, animal farming and fishing. They also deal with trading, taking advantage of the relationship established with Macedonia. But these accessories of the economy do not satisfy at the right extent the needs of the population. Agricultural products are low-rated. But Prespa Area has enormous tourist values. By a decision of the Central Government it has been declared National Park. There are some of the XII-th and XIII-th centuries churches constructed within rocks, a rarity in the Balkans and Europe. They offer special artistic values also because of the wall-paintings inside the rock. Considering these values Prespa Area has been an attraction for the foreigners. It has been involved in the projects of the World Bank and the German Federal Government. To this end studies are underway about the development of tourism.

### **In-field meetings**

Among the in-field meetings with the locals, they expressed their dissatisfaction about the situation of infrastructure, there have been some improvements, but they are insufficient. The road linking with Korça, is in a miserable state. Actually this is the reason it is marginalized precisely because of the low level infrastructure. The telephone networking lacks. They voiced their concern about the electric power cuts and insecure state of the supply with drinking water, that is also cut.

There were established contacts and different meetings were held to create a wide tabloid of the current situation of the minority and the rights they enjoy. The monitoring group met with senior authorities of the Korce region, those of the local authorities, with the Office of the development at the Prefecture, with the Education Department, with journalists of the electronic media and local radio stations. The issue was discussed in a meeting with the OSCE representative at the district.

Special part of the monitoring mission was covered from the meetings at the place of the minority. There were established contacts and talks were held with representatives of the Liqenas commune (centre of the area), representatives of the education, health, and border police at the commune. A special meeting was held with the representative of the association “Organisation for the protection of the Macedonians’ human rights in Albania – Association Prespa”. Mission members met with local inhabitants, men, women, children in some villages of the commune.

Out of the meetings and talks it did not result any case of discrimination based on the national affiliation, nor cases of the application of the law in a differentiated way, of the violation of the constitutional principle according to which citizens are equal to law. There were also not noticed cases of intolerance and xenophobia. The majority and the minority are in normal and peaceful relations. There were no cases of any effort for the assimilation of the Macedonian minority.

### **Education and media**

During these meetings special attention was shown to the problems of education. In order to collect the data, contacts were established with representatives of the Education Department of Korça., head master of the school of Liqenasi, as well as the Chief of Liqenasi Commune, which enabled setting up a general background, providing a full picture about the situation of education in the Prespa area and the share taken by the Macedonian minority in the local media.

There are elementary schools in the nine villages of the area and lessons are held at the Macedonian mother tongue language. There are eight-year schools at the two biggest villages of the commune, Liqenas and Gorice e Madhe, where 20 percent of the texts are held at the mother tongue language. At the centre of the commune there is a high school as well. The history of the Macedonian people is a special subject at the school. All minority schools have twin partnerships with counterparts in Macedonia. All the teaching personnel is local and with the proper education. It has graduated the universities in Elbasan, Kortcha and Macedonia. There is on average one teacher for 15-20 students. A positive fact noticed was that there was no school abandonment from the children. The teaching personnel is under a continuous training. But unfortunately after the training part of the personnel change jobs or pass over to a new sector and upon leaving they do not return home any more.

Students that graduate high schools go to follow the university in Tirana, or in Skopje or Manastir. In some cases they have gone to study in other European countries, most of those who do not continue university education go to work in Macedonia.

Kortcha Education Department gave the following tableau on the education level at the area.

There is a general high school in Liqenas, one eight-year school in Gorice e Vogel and six elementary schools in Djellas, Lajthize, Zaroshke, Gorice e Madhe, Kallamas and Gollomgoq. There are 468 students at the schools, out of which 208 girls. There are eight kindergartens with 193 children. They have 11 teachers out of which eight are with middle-level education and three with university graduation (for pre-school children). The greatest number of children at the kindergartens is at Liqenas with 45, Kallamas with 27 children, and Gorice e Madhe with 28 children. There are 44 teachers at all the schools, out of which nine at the high school in Liqenas (all with university education), 12 at the eight-year schools in Liqenas (seven with high pedagogical education and five with middle school level education. At the eight-year school in Gorice e Vogel there are 153 students with 13 teachers, out of which 11 with high pedagogical education and two with middle-level education.

The following table gives data on the spread of the elementary schools at the area:

Djellas	27 pupils	2 teachers	1 with middle schooling 1 with university education
Lajthize	7 pupils	2 teachers	1 with middle schooling 1 with university education
Zaroshke	24 pupils	2 teachers	1 with middle schooling

			1 with university education
Gorice e Madhe	38 pupils	2 teachers	1 with middle schooling 1 with university education
Kallamas	30 pupils	2 teachers	1 with middle schooling 1 with university education
Gollomboq	10 pupils	1 teacher	1 with middle schooling

Liqenas high school has 154 students while the eight-year school 179 students.

Some concerns and suggestions were made. They asked an education inspector for this area be nominated at the Kortcha Education Department and he be entitled with the establishment of contacts and the coordination of the links with the proper schools in Macedonia. There was concern books in Macedonian language are lacking in some subjects and there are not enough funding for that. The problem could be resolved with a better coordination of the work between the Albanian and the Macedonian sides. Another problem raised from the Liqenas commune representatives was the overload of the students with parallel programs in the Albanian and Macedonian languages. For that it was suggested that the Albanian literature be held in the Albanian language while the Macedonian one in the Macedonian language. That would avoid parallelism and the unnecessary overload.

During the monitoring (representatives of the Macedonian minority) there were received some data concerning the place of the Macedonian minority at the local media. In general the situation is as follows. Radio Kortcha gives a 30-minute program in Macedonian every day. It transmits news and songs in Macedonian. It was noted there was not enough funding to give more programs in Macedonian. The Education Department said there were efforts to open a local radio in Liqenas that was to function totally in Macedonian. The local television broadcast special shows for the area. Besides them the Macedonian minority has its own periodical newspaper. It should be noted the population is free to exercise its religious affiliation. In most of the villages there have been built or are being built new orthodox churches, a fact contested during the monitoring. A new big church is that of Saint Mary for which a considerable funding has been given by the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

## **Health**

Health was presented with positive parameters. From the in-field observations and the data gathered in the talks with the Chief of Ligenasi Commune it resulted that there is a hospital centre at Ligenas commune. The level of health service is relatively pleasurable. There is a complete personnel working there. Each village has got a nurse and a midwife. A number of women give birth in Kortcha, others in Ligenas and part of them at their houses. There are two doctors for the whole zone. It was stressed much effort should be done to improve the conditions of the birth-giving rooms at the villages so that women give birth near their families. Some NGOs have given a direct technical contribution and also assistance for the women awareness for their health and that of their children.

## **Economic development and prospects**

The monitoring group paid attention to the politics followed for the development of the zone. That issue was discussed with representatives of the Kortcha region and the local authorities at the commune. They were assured of a special attention paid to its development at the moment and in the future. Based on a decision of the Council of Ministers, Prespa has been declared a national park. There have been compiled some projects, like that for the drinking water supply (Kallamas), irrigation, and road improvement. Different associations and foundations, mainly the German ones, have held researches for the development of tourism at Prespa area. There was displeasure for the situation of the infrastructure without which there could be no tourism development.

Consequently Prespa area remains somewhat put aside, something that is closely linked with the development of infrastructure. The regular telephone link is missing. Three villages have still no drinking water supply. In some others there are many cuts of the power supply. Unemployment is relativisht at high levels though not so much compared to other areas in the country. The above-mentioned projects are hoped to bring an improvement of the situation.

## **Relations with the local administration**

The monitoring group also asked for clarifications about the relations of the local administration with the minority area. This issue was especially discussed with the representatives of Korça District, of the local administration and the Prespa Commune itself. Impression made was that the contacts were systematic and constant. It was made sure that a special attention must be shown as to improvement of the situation, for the development of the area in the actual stage, as well as the perspective.

## **Complaints and demands**

*In the contacts with the heads of the police and local government bodies* it was affirmed that criminality is not a distressing problem. The situation appears to be calm and normal, it is even better than in the rest of Korça district. Selfjudgement is not a problem as well, there have been no such cases identified. The practice of vendetta is nowhere to be found in this area.

During the monitoring and the contacts with different individuals there was the impression a peaceful atmosphere prevails at the human level. No one from the questioned persons spoke of personal problems or for quarrels with the local inhabitants or those of the majority of the population. There were noted some general problems concerning the community, some of them were mentioned above. To the question if local inhabitants felt themselves equal to others they responded they did not notice any discrimination based on the neither national affiliation, nor cases of a differentiated law application for the minority persons.

During the contacts there were some concerns on other problems of the daily life. That had to do with the customs. Representatives of the Ligenas commune and those of the “Prespa Association” complained that among the customs ranks and that of the border police there is a low number of Macedonian elements. It was noted that despite having qualified and educated persons who could do such a job there was a tendency to employ newcomers and not persons from the minority. A poll made by the monitoring group in talks with responsible persons of these official structures it resulted that out of 60 border police ranks there are 10 from the minority, *(the monitoring group besides the meetings with the representatives of the police bodies went to the border and held meetings with the border police forces.)*. At the Prespa customs there are nine officials and two are local ones. Concerning that there was also the complaint that the existing customs in the area does not operate. Representatives of “Prespa Association” considered that a discriminating stand negatively affecting the economic development of the area. Custom officials confirmed the fact but stressed it had not the proper infrastructure and the necessary material basis to make operations of a normal customs office while local inhabitants could freely pass the border point.

Another complaint had to do with the presence of the local inhabitants among the police forces. It was demanded that more policemen from the Macedonian minority should be among the police ranks. Nevertheless it should be noted that the law sets some rules and criteria to get employed at the police forces.



### **Relations with the motherland**

Applying article 17 of the Convention the Albanian State has complied with the spirit of good understanding and cooperation with the Macedonian counterpart. Peaceful contacts and relations between the Macedonian minority and Macedonia have not hampered but they have been encouraged along the whole borderline separating Albania from Macedonia. These relations have been given a new push at the current moments. It should be noted that the minority being along the border with their motherland have been assisted and have profited a lot of facilities. For example, persons from the minority of the Prespe zone are granted free visas to enter Macedonia; books in Macedonian are printed in Macedonia and are given for free to the students; all teachers of the minority schools go many times a year to Macedonia for a free qualification.

During the first days of august 2002 an undesired incident happened going out of the context of the regime of the minorities. Skopje interior minister made a visit to Prespe area without letting the Albanian authorities know about that in advance. He held meetings and speeches without being prohibited. But he surpassed the limits when he told the inhabitants there they would be given the Macedonian citizenship; they would also be entitled to vote so that they could take part at the mid-September general elections in Macedonia. That was beyond the limits of a normal care for the minority. That was interpreted as a hasty gesture and inspired by some extreme nationalist circles in Macedonia. Macedonian Helsinki Committee protested to this initiative considering it a manoeuvre undertaken by extremist circles for electoral effects.

It should be considered the fact, however, that the Albanian authorities reacted in a mature way and the incident did not serve as a cause of conflicts between the two countries. The Albanian government responded to that visit with another visit from its minister of social affairs to the area. He considered the visit from his Macedonian colleague as political tourism. In the contacts with the local authorities and the inhabitants there he stressed that Prespe area was of priority because of its many natural resources. For that purpose he recommended a better cooperation with the local authorities especially concerning investment. He added that a number of projects were in process and could be launched next year. He reacted to the initiative of the Macedonian interior minister saying that the problems of the minorities are not resolved with nationalism but with integration.

### **Round Table in the district of Korça**

After the monitoring held in the Prespa area where the Macedonian minority resides (the relevant report has been submitted) Albanian Helsinki Committee in Korça, on the date 04.10.2002 arranged a round table to submit the conclusions drawn from this monitoring. In this meeting representatives of the local power bodies as well as

Macedonian minority participated. Heads of the non-governmental organizations, employees of the electronic and print media participated, as well as representatives of the Macedonian Helsinki Committee invited by our side.

In her speech, the Executive Director Ms. Vasilika Hysi tackled some significant issues encountered in the monitoring in the Prespa area and precisely those related to the education in the mother tongue, as well as the observation of their rights in all the other fields in compliance with the Copenhagen Context Convention and our Constitution. To this end mention was made of the facts and cases showing the improvements achieved in this area in education, health, culture and infrastructure. The identified shortcomings and lacks were not of a discriminatory character, fact this confirmed by some participants of this minority. Thus the lack of some textbooks in the mother tongue was due to technical problems and the enforcement of the agreements between both countries Albania- Macedonia. Nevertheless the Ministry of Education was briefed and it was committed to solving this issue. Besides, the Department of Education of Korça undertook to devote special attention to this issue.

Head of the association "Druzhiba Prespa" strongly highlighted some of the problems that according to him are of great concern to this minority which he considered as discriminatory signals. Thus for e.g. he considered as discriminatory the fact that the Macedonian minority must have more employees in the public administration bodies. Likewise he considered as discriminatory delays in the textbooks in the Macedonian language and the not-so-good infrastructure.

His views in this direction found no support by other participants, among them Macedonian ones who agreed about the improvement of the situation and the observation of the rights of this minority, but did not agree about the existence of any kind of discrimination.

However, the participants reached the conclusion that not only the non-governmental organizations but especially AHC must work hardly on social opinion awareness as regards the observation of the minority rights. Also the local power bodies must show due consideration to the problems concerning minorities in Albania.